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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of four sections by different authors. Section 1: History of Honors at SUNY Rockland. (by Samuel Draper, founder of Honor's Program). Discusses the development of the honors program at Rockland Community College from the late 1960's. Honors courses originated in the late 1960's and in 1977 the college founded the Mentor Talented Student Honors Program (MTS) to better recruit high-performing high school students and prepare them for transfer to prestigious universities. Section 2: Teaching in the MTS Honors Program (by Nancy Hazelton, Professor SUNY Rockland). Discusses the role of faculty in the HTS Program, honors curriculum elements, and the responsibilities of mentors. Section 3: A Student's Evaluation of the MTS Program (by James McNamara, College sophomore). Discusses the advantages and benefits of the MTS Program in terms of curriculum, skills acquired, interaction with professors, collaboration with mentors, and transfer readiness. Section 4: Honors at Bergen Community College (by Robert Kahn, Dean, Bergen C.C.). Discusses the benefits to other colleges of being mentored by Rockland's MTS program through the FIPSE project (Fund for Improvement in Post-Secondary Education). (RDG)

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The Mentor/Talented Student Honors Program at SUNY Rockland

by
Dr. Samuel Draper, Dr. Nancy Hazelton, James McNamara, Dr. Robert Kahn

History of Honors at SUNY Rockland

How did honors happen at SUNY Rockland? The genesis began in the late 1960s when Prof. Libby Bay, now the coordinator of Humanities, then chair of English, established English 101 and 102 Honors. I can't recall exactly how the students were selected, but the classes materialized and were a success. By 1972, students who had completed Honors 101 and 102 asked if the English department could arrange a sophomore literature honors course, which we promptly did. Those courses were numbered English 220 and 221, Honors Literature Seminars, often devoted to a single author such as Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Balzac, Dickens, and sometimes even text such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Besides a heavy reading assignment, the honors students, usually seated in a seminar circle, were asked to participate orally on the reading at hand, were given cumulative essay exams, and were expected to accomplish a major research essay. In this regard, many of these enrollees registered for English 910, Theory and Practice of Researching, which had been established with the advent of English 101 and 102 Honors.

In 1975 and 1976, after meeting bi-monthly to determine the future of the college, the full professors issued their report in June 1977. The consensus of their findings was that Rockland Community College was catering to the older returning adult as well as the average student and the technical enrollees, but in no way were we recruiting or accommodating the excellent high school student. With that edict in mind, Prof. Bay and I approached Dr. Seymour Eskow, then president of RCC, who believed in the honors concept, and agreed

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to a college-wide honors program, named The Mentor Talented Student Honors Program, Liberal Arts and Sciences, to begin in the fall 1977. Honors courses were established in English, history, psychology, biology, chemistry, math, and philosophy. Faculty approval was generally forthcoming—the usual arguments were given against honors, but the full professors, who were powerful and highly respected, really challenged the college to aggressively pursue honors.

However, when I met with the counselors of the ten public high schools in Rockland County in the spring of 1977, opposition was intense. One counselor remarked vociferously, "Rockland Community College will never transfer anybody to an Ivy League College!" Of course, one swallowed the insults with difficulty, but that counselor, who was joined in chorus by several others, threw down the negative gauntlet with great defiance. However, those detractors did not anticipate that we would not give in to their hostile disapproval. We advertised the MTS Honors Program widely in our local newspaper, visited honors courses in high schools to talk to students, and gradually—it took several years—they half-heartedly began to cooperate.

Not daunted, however, by their lack of enthusiasm for MTS, we simply recruited students who were interested in honors. Many at first were not qualified to work in a high level atmosphere, but by 1980, we tightened the admission requirements to roughly those of today—1150 minimum combined SAT score, and a GPA of 90 or higher. We relied heavily on letters of recommendation, and we welcomed the classic "turn-around applicant" whose SAT scores were 1200-1300 or higher, but with a low high school GPA (or conversely, the student with a 98 GPA and mediocre SATs) as students who could accomplish excellent

college work if they were motivated and challenged. In these cases, our devotion to mentoring paid off—each student ideally was placed with a full professor in his major interest who would act as teacher, registrar, guide, friend, more than just a mentor in name. The ideal mentor goes beyond what most counselors have time for, to see the student regularly, to develop a close relationship with same, to act as an intellectual challenge, and to instill in the student a sense of self-worth, and to change perhaps a rather limited mind-set that never would have included the idea of transferring to Harvard, Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, Duke, Georgetown, Amherst, Wesleyan, or Stanford.

One such student comes to mind, Monica Ganssle, with a 1400 SAT, was turned off by high school. Her counselor told us if we could challenge Monica, she could accomplish a great deal. As her mentor, when she came to MTS as a freshman in 1986, I recall seeing her everyday, changing her schedule to accommodate her interest and ours, and to instill in her a different self-image. Somehow it worked for both of us. After two years of excellent work in honors, with a GPA of 3.9 (she received one A-), Monica was accepted as a full junior transfer to Yale, Harvard, and Stanford. She chose Harvard, studied Japanese and economics, graduated with Honors, and after a stay in Japan working in investment banking, returned to Stanford where she graduated from law school, took an MBA also at Stanford, and is now a top investment banker on Wall Street. Recently Monica told me she was engaged to a highly successful Wall Street CEO! A success story, certainly, but all of you who establish honors programs will realize the same.

Since 1977, our MTS Honors program has transferred over 1800 students to all the Ivy League colleges except Princeton, which does not take transfer applicants, and to Tier One

colleges, as well as to the major state universities such as Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, UC Berkeley, UCLA and, of course, our own SUNY institutions. We now have such a successful track record that several prestigious colleges actually come to our campus to recruit the MTS graduates.

Teaching in the MTS Honors Program

MTS requirements are embedded in the larger requirements of the college—we are sort of the play within the play. To achieve an honors degree along with the college degree, a student has to complete seven honors courses, including an Honors Literature Seminar and a Philosophy Seminar entitled *Processes of Thinking*. Other honors requirements include two semesters of foreign language study, ENG 910 (methods of researching), and either independent study or study abroad.

As for courses, all Rockland students take ENG 101 and 102, courses that have goals common to all classes, but the MTS students have more demanding objectives, texts, and assignments in their composition sequence.

Whereas regular ENG 101 courses typically use anthologies such as the *Short Prose Reader* or *Across Cultures*, both of which feature short topical essays or excerpts, ENG 101 Honors instructors all use *A World of Ideas*, edited by Lee A. Jacobus. This text includes works such as Bacon's "The Four Idols," Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," and Nietzsche's "Apollonianism and Dionysianism." Also, while regular ENG 101 students are required to do a short documented essay, honors students must produce a full 10-page formal research paper. Honors professors control topics to ensure that students engage directly with these canonical texts (not just with secondary sources) and find something original to say about them. Often research topics involve unlikely couplings or groupings to pressure the student writer to think about the texts in new ways. The BEACON CONFERENCE FOR STUDENT SCHOLARS provides a clear incentive to our research-paper writers: on the Rockland campus, identification as a Beacon Scholar is regarded as a significant achievement.

ENG 102, across the department, is an introduction to writing about literature, but the Honors version falls more in line with university-level "great books" courses. Students read core texts such as *Oedipus, Hamlet,* and *Madame Bovary*, and instructors flesh out the syllabus with their preferences from the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*—Beckett, Achebe and others, as well as selections of poetry. Some curricular choices are determined by local events: last year, Rockland Opera was doing Otello, so that became the Shakespeare play for the semester; this semester, I took my honors students to see Ragtime, so the class read the novel beforehand.

The Honors Literature Seminar is the most rigorous literature offering at the college and is conducted on a very high level indeed. The first one I developed, on Comedy and Tragedy, was modeled on a graduate seminar I took at Columbia University with Bernard Beckerman. With my current seminar on Shakespeare, the students deal not only with the plays (as in the regular Shakespeare course), but with the critical discourse and primary historical documents as well. The topic this semester is *Shakespeare's Others*; the students are confronting issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the plays, and trying to sift through the often conflicting portraits of life in early modern England.

As for a teaching style in all my classes, there is a combination of discussion and lecture, but in honors classes I put much more responsibility on the students to perform. No one can "hide" in an honors class; each person is active and engaged. The designated "resource person" holds forth on an aspect of the text read for that day and is graded on presentation. Students recognize early-on that they are responsible for their own success and that it is not generated by passive note-taking.

MTS Honors Program

The mentoring system, which is the heart of the MTS Program, is formalized with very specific responsibilities. The mentors:

- Interview incoming freshmen
- Register all incoming mentees and orient them to the requirements of the program and the college
- Meet weekly with all mentees for progress reports on classes
- Advocate for students in personal difficulty (family difficulty, etc.). The mentor does not "fix" things for the mentee, but can enable the student to move more easily toward academic success when legitimate impediments occur. The formalized arrangement facilitates the process; the student knows that it is the mentor's job to be her advocate, and she does not feel she has overstepped when she asks for help
- Counsel students in academic difficulty
- Assist mentees in identifying appropriate transfer institutions
- Assist mentees in preparing applications for transfer
- Write letters of recommendation
- Consult with other MTS mentors vis-à-vis their students
- Continue mentoring relationship with graduates

Regarding study abroad, SUNY Rockland has a wide array of study abroad offerings and honors students fill many of the courses: in London during January, France and Italy in June, and semester programs through our involvement in CCIS. The MTS Program now has an affiliation with the Cambridge Summer School, and last summer we sent our first two

MTS Honors Program

MTS students to Cambridge, one to study English literature and the other medieval history. As their mentor, I reviewed the students' assignments, suggested possible topics for research, and advised them into appropriate sections. Their work was assessed by Cambridge faculty and I determined their honors grades for the courses. This summer of 1999, we have twelve MTS Honors students registered for the Cambridge Program, studying Shakespeare, world history, English literature, and art history, and I will be their on-site mentor; starting next summer, in 2000, we will offer the program to honors students on other campuses.

A Student's Evaluation of the MTS Program

As a sophomore and president of the Student Government Association, I have completed almost two years in the MTS Program, and have seen collaboration function as the underpinning of everything we accomplish. In my experience, all involved in the program have collaborated in four basic areas: academics, planning for the short-term, planning for the long-term, and extracurricular activities.

In the first and most important dimension of this program, academics, we find MTS to be rigorous and rewarding. We take all of the courses that students do at any premier four-year university, and also benefit from a high quality of instruction. The limited size of classes at SUNY Rockland gives us the opportunity for classes that are personalized, allowing for our growth in two crucial areas, writing and critical thinking.

Our writing develops greatly through feedback and discussion. I have seen what friends of mine at other schools do in English 101 and 102 courses, but I know that I have had the advantage of truly learning how to write. Instructors go into detail in correcting students' work and in explaining important expositional and creative concepts. For instance, one always wants to know *why* an idea is better expressed in a particular way; what makes a successful academic essay. Having come to understand this process of writing, we have been taught how to read, write, and think effectively.

Critical thinking comes about with the help of discussion and provocative questions like those that we encounter in our classes. When we are forced to think for ourselves, we really do learn. Furthermore, this skill is an essential one for all other courses that we will take during any part of our education.

In addition to these advantages, MTS students have another—the accessibility of professors. It is not uncommon for colleges to tout dedicated faculty, but I have seen that at SUNY Rockland it comes as advertised. Whatever students' concerns may be, academic or otherwise, they can avail themselves of a professor for help. This principle has held true in my own experience, as well. Last year, for example, I enrolled in Intermediate Spanish I and II, the highest level Spanish courses currently offered by the College. However, I have since been working with Professor Bierman, my former instructor, in a weekly conversation exercise. The purpose is to maintain my skills in order to continue taking Spanish when I transfer, and I am grateful to her for the extra time afforded me.

The second major area in which mentors collaborate with their mentees is planning for the short-term. Actually, one of the first significant occasions that the two work together is registration. During this time, the mentor helps the mentee to navigate through a sea of instructors' names, matches their interests with their classes, and encourages them to explore other fields. Throughout our careers at SUNY Rockland, we work with our mentors, really our guides, on many other issues that may come up.

The third important aspect of collaboration with mentors is planning for the long-term, or the transfer process. The mentors are aware of the program's track record with transfer institutions, and how we would fit in at those particular schools. The courses that we have been advised to take have been designed to transfer at the highest level. With the mentor's first-hand knowledge of the schools we are considering, paired with their knowledge of us as individuals, we get a clearer view of where to consider applying. I have sent applications to five schools: *Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania, Fordham University, Boston

College, and Tufts University. They are the schools that I would like to attend above all others. (* Editor's note: James McNamara was accepted to Yale as a junior transfer from MTS.)

In my extracurricular activities, my final point regarding collaboration, I have seen how MTS fits into the community college philosophy. As president of the Student Senate, I am exposed to many of the beliefs of the College's administration, and see that they are often the same as those of the mentors. Within the program there is a general belief that students will work up to their potential if they are challenged to do so. Secondly, there is a belief that students can rebound academically. And thirdly, there is the belief that students must have a sense of belonging in their school.

Through my activities, I have seen how MTS students benefit the school as a whole. MTS students really do take the initiative to become active and to lead, and have a commitment to all of those at the College—both honors and non-honors students. Senators have been careful to fund the services and organize the events that everyone wants to see on campus. Peer tutors help to encourage and teach others. The diligence that students in this program develop will always spill over into the College in general.

I am fortunate to be a student in the MTS Program, and I hope that many others will have the advantage and the many opportunities that I have had. This program is an effective one because it takes advantage of the benefits of students and faculty collaborating, assuring that we will be successful while always having a guide available.

Honors at Bergen Community College

My role today is to speak for the others—the other community colleges that have signed on to be mentored by Rockland's MTS program through the FIPSE project (Fund for Improvement in Post-Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education). Mentor is certainly a key word in today's presentation. It's important to note that Rockland chose to call itself a mentoring program more than 25 years ago—long before mentoring became the buzzword that it has become in academic circles. Just as MTS students have been mentored through the years by Dr. Draper and Dr. Hazelton, and their colleagues, the other community colleges participating in this project are the objects of the same kind of expert guidance and genuine concern for our growth and well-being. Our hope is to shine so that we can be thought of by our friends at Rockland as "talented students."

The only thing that unites the participating colleges is our gratitude to Rockland for letting us draw upon their experience and expertise. They are very generous. The list of participating colleges has changed somewhat since the project began. There are some deletions and some additions. The act of signing on to a proposed FIPSE project should be viewed as an expression of good intentions that sometimes does not survive the reality of needing to send real people to attend real meetings at specified times. So some dropped out. But, there is a countervailing trend. Once the FIPSE was awarded, other community colleges heard that help was available for ailing honors programs and they signed on, eager to attend the meetings and learn what needed to be learned. So we've gained a few.

The current roster of 12 community colleges working with Rockland on the FIPSE project includes 5 from New York State (Corning, Dutchess, LaGuardia, Onondaga, and Westchester), 4 from New Jersey (Bergen, Brookdale, Camden, and Ocean County), 1 from

Pennsylvania (Lehigh Carbon), and 2 from Maryland (Allegany and Baltimore County). We run the gamut—large institutions and smaller colleges; urban, suburban, and rural locations. Our honors programs also run the gamut. While no one has a program as strong as Rockland's, some of us have had stable honors programs for a long time. Others, such as Camden, signed on for the FIPSE project as part of an effort to create an honors program. Some of us (such as Brookdale, Corning, and Lehigh Carbon) offer 10-15 honors courses a year, while others (such as Allegany) offer—not separate sections—but contracts that permit individual students to turn any course into an honors experience.

Although we may not be typical, let me take a few moments to discuss how the honors program at Bergen Community College has been strengthened through our association with Rockland. Bergen is located in Paramus, New Jersey. We are a comprehensive community college enrolling close to 12,000 students and currently the largest community college in New Jersey. As an institution we enjoy many advantages: a prosperous suburban setting; easy access to the cultural attractions of New York City; strong leadership from our president and academic vice president (the kind of leadership that fosters a good working relationship between the faculty and the administration); and—last, but not least—a faculty which has more than its fair share of academic stars who are both excellent teachers and productive scholars. You need to know that I am something of a ringer. I worked at Rockland as a dean for 5 ½ years before I moved to Bergen less than 3 years ago. I arrived at Bergen just in time to sign on as a partner for the Rockland FIPSE application. Assigned to work with the Bergen honors program, I found a well-established program under capable faculty leadership serving about 80-90 students and offering 8-10 courses each semester. But the program was not

poised to grow or develop and was missing much of the dynamism of the Rockland program. Beyond the classroom experience, there was no mentoring of the students. Honors courses were offered in a very limited number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. There was no concern with assisting the students to transfer to the top four-year schools. Most noticeably, there was poor recruitment. The program—though over 20 years old—apparently had never had a brochure to advertise its existence. There was no effort to recruit in the local high schools or even among the entering freshman class; typically, students were invited to take honors courses only after their first semester grades were in and demonstrated that they were good students.

To strengthen our program, we've taken full advantage of the FIPSE grant. The two faculty co-directors of our honors program and myself have attended several day-long meetings at Rockland. For half of the day, Rockland personnel shared information about the components of Rockland's program. For the remainder of the day, we divided into groups and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of our own programs with Rockland people and representatives of other participating colleges. Moreover, during the last year, we've had two visitors from Rockland—Professors Phyllis Krasnow and Sam Draper—come to meetings of our honors committee to discuss the Rockland model, answer faculty questions, and suggest better ways to serve our students. When we get together with our colleagues at Rockland and the other participating colleges, we discuss interesting things. We compare the merits of separate honors courses (often limited in number, but providing wonderful experiences for faculty and students because of the group dynamics) to the merits of individual honors contracts (allowing students a wide latitude in accumulating honors credits, but lacking the

dynamic group experience which is so central to honors seminars). We also discuss the opposition to honors programs that exists in some quarters as self-proclaimed advocates of egalitarianism criticize honors as an unhealthy form of elitism. We, of course, recognize that the mission of comprehensive community colleges is to serve all of our students. Quality remedial programs and quality honors programs are both important to us, and not mutually exclusive. Indeed, I will be speaking on another panel at this convention, addressing another subject on which I've labored long and hard: improving access for minority students. As minorities achieve greater access, I'd like there to be honors courses for them to take. Rather than targeting small struggling honors programs, I'd like to see the champions of egalitarianism take on something a little more challenging: perhaps the disparity between the embarrassingly small salaries we offer new faculty and the generous salaries we pay senior faculty, or perhaps the disparity between regular faculty and adjuncts.

So what have we accomplished at Bergen? With Rockland's help, this year we have begun mentoring our students. With the incentive that honors students who meet with their faculty mentors can get priority registration, our students are signing up for appointments and responding well. We have, for the first time, an honors brochure which explains the requirements of our program and is a recruitment tool. We recently exhausted our initial supply of 5000 copies and have put in an order for a second improved version. Next October, we will have our first transfer seminar designed specifically to prepare our honors students for the world beyond Bergen. We now actively recruit. We mail letters to those high school applicants who have a good high school record and encourage them to take honors courses from "Day One." In the coming weeks, shamelessly copying Rockland, we will be sending

our first recruitment letter to the parents of high school seniors who tested well on the SAT. We have broadened our offerings as well. For the first time, we offered honors courses in speech and business. We have plans to offer courses in science and mathematics. As a result, our numbers are up. This semester we served a record number of students—about 130. The number of sections is up modestly to 12-14 a semester, but most importantly, the enrollment per section is much healthier, with several hitting our limit of 20 honors students per section.

One of the secrets of a successful mentoring relationship is that, while the mentor provides ideas and models and support, there is no orthodoxy that the mentee must adopt. Each participating college has felt free to retain its own distinctive approach to providing honors instruction. Indeed, I know my friends at Rockland will not be offended if I claim that the Bergen program may be superior to the Rockland program in two respects. First, Bergen's program has always accommodated evening students—often older and often part-time—by offering a better selection of honors courses at night. Second, the Bergen program is starting to do a better job of appealing to students outside the liberal arts by offering honors sections for students in career programs, such as business.

Before I conclude, let me put in a brief plug for the Beacon Conference. Some years ago, Rockland—working with a group of colleges—secured a grant from the AACC and Kellogg Foundation to put on an annual conference for student-scholars at two-year schools in the Mid-Atlantic Region (essentially, the area from Massachusetts to Maryland). Since the grant money ran out, we've run the conference on $500 and $1000 contributions made by sponsoring colleges. Students from virtually every discipline are invited to submit their research papers to this competition. The students submitting the three best papers in fifteen

subject-areas are then invited to present their papers at the Beacon Conference, always held the first Friday in June. There are cash prizes. $100 goes to the student presenting the best paper in each subject-area; another $100 goes to the faculty member who served as the mentor for each winning student. We provide a continental breakfast and lunch to all those who attend. We've kept the cost for those who attend to the very affordable price of zero. The Conference has been held in the past at Rockland, Dutchess, Harford Community College in Maryland, Westchester, and Bergen. This June our seventh Conference will be at Dutchess again.

About half the FIPSE colleges are active in sponsoring the Beacon Conference. I mention this conference, not only because it's a wonderful event that makes you very proud of the work that our students are able to produce, but because many of us use the Beacon Conference to further the aims of our honors programs. We ask our students to submit their honors seminar papers to Beacon. Often our students have the experience of presenting at Beacon. They work hard on their papers and presentations. Sometimes they win.

If your school is located in the Mid-Atlantic Region, you might want to participate. Have your students submit their papers. Perhaps your school would like to become a sponsor. I have copies of the flyer that announced this year's competition. It's too late to enter, but all are invited to Dutchess Community College in Poughkeepsie, New York on Friday, June 4, 1999.* Give me your business card, and I'll send you more information—travel directions, the schedule of panels, etc. If you're not from the Mid-Atlantic Region, what you need to do is start your own regional conference. You might also want to come in June and observe how

it's done. (* Editor's Note: the Beacon Conference will return to SUNY Rockland on June 2, 2000, where it began in 1992, and will also participate in the FIPSE Conference on June 3rd.)

One final point. Rockland has been able to work with other colleges on strengthening their honors programs because of a FIPSE grant. FIPSE made it all possible. But, if you've followed the news, you know that FIPSE—the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education—has recently been badly damaged by Congress. Using the same wisdom that they displayed during the impeachment process, members of Congress have, for the most part, ended FIPSE's ability to fund bright ideas and instead channeled the money to the pet projects of politicians. It's a great loss and a real shame. And I thought someone ought to say it.